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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000793

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SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S ELECTORAL COMMISSION FLOUNDERING

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

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¶1. (C) Summary: In post's first-ever meeting with an official from Cameroon's Electoral Commission (Elections Cameroon, or ELECAM), Director General Mohaman Sani Tanimou told Pol/Econ Chief he is in the process of hiring staff and believes he has adequate legal authority. However, he lacks the budget, electoral equipment and voter register needed to prepare for scheduled 2011 presidential elections. He conceded that the composition of ELECAM's leadership still undermines its credibility. A visiting UN elections team reinforced strong views voiced by resident Ambassadors that ELECAM remains crippled. The UN team proposed a set of benchmarks under which, by July 2010, ELECAM will have to demonstrate improved operational effectiveness and have a cohesive legal framework and credible voter register or face a cut-off of UN support. End summary.

Setting Up

¶2. (U) Since President Biya named the Council members of the Electoral Commission (ELECAM) in December 2008, Tanimou has focused on creating the organization's administrative structure. ELECAM has adopted internal documents and SOPs, established its internal organizational chart, and decided on how to staff its offices. In July, Tanimou began recruiting candidates for thousands of jobs at the 10 regional offices, 58 departments, and 360 communities; he has completed recruiting for the regions and half the departments. While all twelve members of the ELECAM Council are soliciting candidates for positions, Tanimou said he will make the final staffing decisions, hopefully by the end of October.

¶3. (SBU) ELECAM has all the legal authority it needs to operate, Tanimou claimed, although he saw the need to "touch up" three earlier laws covering presidential, National Assembly and municipal council elections, replacing references to the Observatoire National des Elections (ONEL) with ELECAM. (Note: The predecessor to ELECAM, ONEL was run out of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, MINATD. End note.) Tanimou noted that MINATD had been seeking a new electoral code to harmonize the various electoral laws, but he saw no need for one and the presidency had refused it. (MINATD Minister Marafa Hamidou Yaya subsequently told Ambassador that the presidency is still reviewing his draft electoral code.)

A Good Plan...

¶4. (SBU) Tanimou's ideal would be to start voter registration and election preparations in October or November. He would like to spend much, if not all, of 2010 cleaning up the voter register (or starting from scratch if the register is seen to be seriously flawed). He also anticipates needing to train staff and to distribute voter ID

cards to many voters. He largely dismissed public speculation that the election might be brought forward to 2010, saying this would not be allowed under current law and insisting that ELECAM would not be ready to run a national election until at least the end of 2010.

15. (U) Tanimou's stated goal is to run elections whose results are "uncontestable." This would require registering any qualified voter and issuing them all the required electoral cards, ensuring that all polling stations have full representation by the contesting political parties, and providing for transparent counting of votes at each individual voting booth. "We want an election we can be proud of," he asserted, noting his plans to consult with all political parties and civil society in the pre-election period and to include them in election observing on polling day.

But No Money, Equipment or Register

16. (C) None of these preparations can get far without overcoming two major operational obstacles. Tanimou stated that of the 7 billion FCFA (\$15.2 million) he has requested for ELECAM's budget, the Ministry of Finance has only given him 2 billion FCFA (\$4.3 million), of which 500 million FCFA has already been spent. This leaves him with insufficient funds to pay for salaries, rent (all ELECAM buildings are rented), equipment, insurance, vehicles and other expenses, he said. Furthermore, he confirmed that the MINATD has yet to transfer election equipment and the voting register, whether on computer discs or paper copies. MINATD had

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offered no explanation but Tanimou opined that it did not want to let go of the cash and patronage generated by elections; "elections are big money," Tanimou added, with billions of relatively untracked FCFA floating to election and local government officials. Tanimou confirmed press stories of tensions between him and ELECAM President Samuel Fonkam Azu'u over who controls ELECAM resources (Tanimou claims he has the sole authority to hire staff and spend funds). Minister Marafa previously told Ambassador that he was waiting for the presidency to authorize his ministry to release the voter register and election equipment; when Ambassador subsequently raised this with Secretary General of the Presidency Laurent Esso, Esso said no such authorization was pending or needed by the President.

And A Big Credibility Gap

17. (SBU) Tanimou conceded that the 12-member ELECAM Council still has fundamental credibility problems. He wished President Biya had selected a more politically balanced, representative group. Controversies surrounding the President of ELECAM, who has been implicated in a visa scam, also diminished ELECAM's credibility, he said. Some have suggested to Biya that he change the Council members (this could be done by reassigning them elsewhere or expanding the Council), but Tanimou said he didn't know if the President would do so. Tanimou said he would focus on making ELECAM operate in a transparent, credible manner and he hoped for international community support.

International Community Very Skeptical

18. (SBU) Over the past week, a UN Electoral Assistance Division team has been in Cameroon consulting a wide range of stakeholders about the electoral process. In a September 15 meeting with a group of Western Chiefs of Mission, the team leader highlighted disagreements among Cameroonian interlocutors about the applicable laws, the government's lack of consultation with political parties and civil society, and a widespread view that the voter register is

seriously flawed. They expressed concern that MINATD has failed to transfer its election material to ELECAM. Ambassadors from Italy, Spain and the European Union, backed by the French and Canadian Charges, voiced concerns about ELECAM's lack of progress and strong doubts about its abilities and credibility. The Italian Ambassador, the longest serving of the group, said he "can't imagine ELECAM will be ready for an election."

¶9. (SBU) The visiting UN team leader offered up a "Plan B" as a middle ground between disengagement with ELECAM and full support. "Plan B" would provide UN technical assistance to help ELECAM become more operational and to improve electoral laws and internal ELECAM texts. It would set out benchmarks for operational effectiveness, an internationally acceptable legal framework, and a credible voter register. If the benchmarks are not met by July, 2010 the UNDP would withdraw from any support to ELECAM. The Chiefs of Mission endorsed the "Plan B" idea as long as benchmarks are made public and the government and ELECAM are clear that they and not the international community are responsible for making ELECAM work.

Comment

¶10. (C) Tanimou has significant electoral experience (he was previously Technical Advisor at the Presidency, with a focus on electoral issues), his approach makes sense, he was eager to engage the Embassy, and he seems to want to make ELECAM work in a credible manner. However, over eight months after ELECAM was created, he has been slow to get it off the ground and unable to get the political support he needs. The strong views of the Chiefs of Mission reflect increasing worries among many Cameroonian observers that ELECAM is stuck and cannot be put back on track unless the international community engages Biya directly. If Biya can ensure ELECAM gets more fully funded, receives electoral equipment and the voter register from MINATD and has more nonpartisan leadership, ELECAM may yet be able to run reasonably good elections in 2011. Pol/Econ Chief pointed out to Tanimou another big "if" - the hiring and start-up process he controls has to be transparent, apolitical and clean or ELECAM's credibility could sink beyond redemption. Tanimou gave assurances that he would be as neutral and transparent as possible, although he thought it would be "impossible" to hire thousands of qualified people who had no political affiliation. Although the UN resists the idea of

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conditionality and its benchmarks are vague, "Plan B" offers a possible way out for ELECAM and the international community. As one Ambassador commented "there really is no Plan A" and "Plan C" - outright rejection and disengagement from ELECAM - would deal a mortal blow to the credibility of the electoral process.

¶11. (C) Post will be developing an action plan for next steps on ELECAM. If a proposed meeting between Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Carson and President Biya happens in the coming weeks, we believe it would be an excellent opportunity to press for more progress in creating a credible, workable ELECAM.
GARVEY